

## \*\*EL DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS\*\*

El Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is a tradition that combines Catholic beliefs with indigenous customs. El Día de los Muertos is celebrated in Mexico, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Ecuador. The celebration begins on October 31<sup>st</sup> and continues until November 2<sup>nd</sup>. El Día de los Muertos is a celebration dedicated to remembering loved ones who have passed away. This celebration is not a sad time; rather it is a time to celebrate the lives of their deceased loved ones and the continuation of life. It is believed that during the El Día de los Muertos celebrations, the spirits of the deceased loved ones return to visit their relatives.

In order to prepare for their deceased relatives' visit, families begin by constructing beautiful ofrendas or altars for their homes. The ofrendas are covered with a white, embroidered cloth. The ofrendas include clothing, portraits, favorite comidas (foods) and bebidas (drinks), and favorite possessions of los difuntos (the deceased). The ofrendas also have velas (candles) and incienso (incense) to help guide the spirits' souls home, los papeles picados (colored tissue paper with cut-out designs), and many vivid orange and yellow marigold flowers called los cempasúchiles. On ofrendas for children, their favorite sweets and toys may also be included.

Other popular El Día de los Muertos decorations include los esqueletos (skeletons) and las calaveras (skulls). Las calaveras are made of sugar and are available in a variety of shapes and sizes. Los esqueletos are shown dancing, laughing, and making funny faces. Los esqueletos always have a grin to lessen the fear of death.



Another pre-celebration preparation is the cleaning of the graves. Families visit the cemeteries, clean the graves, and decorate them with flores (flowers) and velas. There is also comida placed at the entrance of the cemetery or at the gravesite.

On October 31<sup>st</sup>, the deceased children, los angelitos, return to visit their families. By noon on November 1<sup>st</sup>, the children leave



and the adult souls begin to return, to visit their loved ones and feast on their favorite comida. Common comidas are tamales, atole (corn drink), and pan de los muertos (dead bread). Pan de los muertos is a flat-bread in

the shape of a skull and crossbones. Each pan de los muertos has a small, plastic esqueleto hidden inside. The person that receives the esqueleto will have good luck throughout the year.

The celebrations of El Día de los Muertos are a festive time to remember deceased loved ones and to spend time with family.

### **\*\*THE TRUTH ABOUT DAY OF THE DEAD CELEBRATIONS\*\***

~ El Día de los Muertos is not a cult experience. It is a Catholic/Indigenous tradition. Attending mass is an important part of this celebration.

~ Ofrendas are not used for worshipping but they are used as a way to remember departed relatives.

~ El Día de los Muertos is not a sad time; rather it is a happy time to remember loved ones and to reflect on the cycle of life and death.

~ El Día de los Muertos is similar to visiting a loved one's grave and leaving flowers or lighting a candle.

~ El Día de los Muertos is not a Hispanic version of La Víspera de Todos los Santos (Halloween). El Día de los Muertos has been celebrated since Aztec times.

~ El Día de los Muertos is not a scary día festivo (holiday). There are no costumes, trick or treating, haunted houses, images of ghosts, witches, or the devil.

# Day of the DEAD

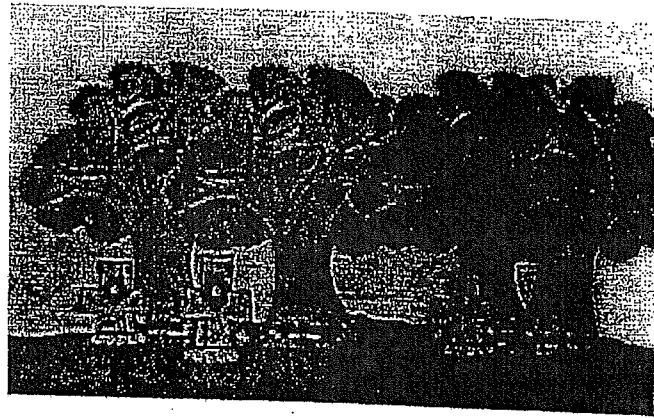
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Covacha

(Día de los Muertos)

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*Tenochtitlan* was the capital of the Aztec empire, now Mexico City. The Aztecs had a very advanced culture with their own system of mathematics, astronomy, and religion. The Aztecs believed that there were three places where the spirits of the dead rested. The warriors who died in battle went to the paradise of the Sun God. Those who died drowning went to the paradise of the Rain God, Tlaloc, and those who died by natural causes went to Mictlán. Aztecs viewed death as the continuation of life. After the Spanish invasion, *Día de los Muertos* (*Day of the Dead*) became a fusion of Aztec beliefs and Christian traditions.



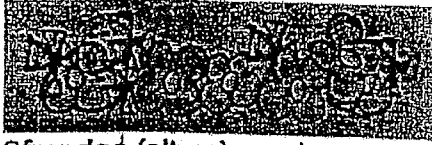
The Aztec deity *Coatlicue*, also known as "Lady of the Serpent Skirt."



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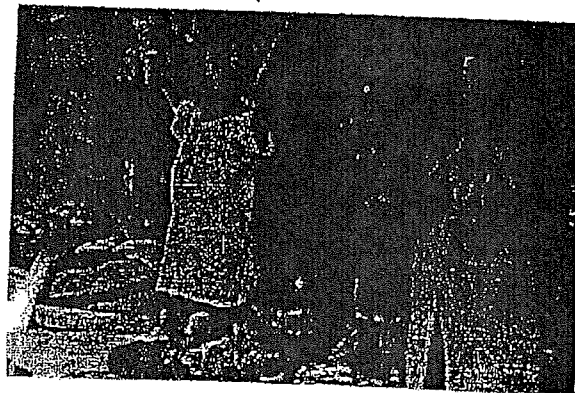
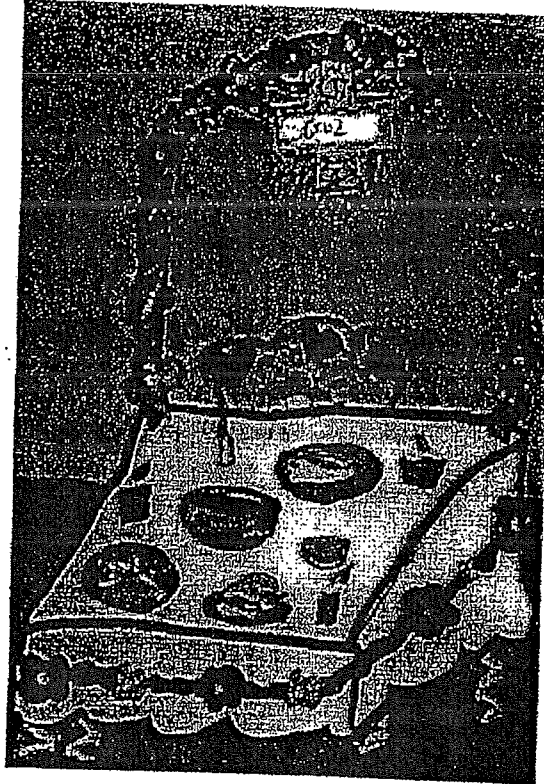
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Ofrendas (altars) are decorated with cempazúchil flowers, images of saints, candles, traditional foods and things that once belonged to the deceased to honor and please the spirits. What the spirits consume is steam from the food. They do not digest it physically; they extract the goodness from what is provided. After the spirits leave, the living visit each other in their homes and exchange the prepared food. Images of favorite saints are frequently placed on the altar to elicit special divine protection for loved ones. A towel, soap and mirror are also seen on the altars for the spirits to freshen up before feasting on their favorite foods.

In some cases chairs are placed for the spirits to sit and rest. In the state of Veracruz the Totonac's an indigenous group suspend a wooden board from the ceiling used for the altar. They also suspend local fruits such as bananas, jicamas, limes, oranges, and mandarins from the ceiling. Traditionally these altars are decorated with green *tepejilote* leaves that are fashioned in the style of suns, stars, and pineapples. The Totonac's also embroider skirts, blouses, napkins, and tablecloths because it is believed that the spirits use these clothes to carry away their food.



2001 Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) Altar at the Mexic-Arte Museum. This altar was created in the style of the altars in Veracruz.

# Day of the DEAD

(Día de los Muertos)

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Altars vary from region to region but most include traditional foods such as mole, atole, tortillas, fruits, pan de muerto, chocolate, and sugar skulls. Even the most basic altar includes three items:

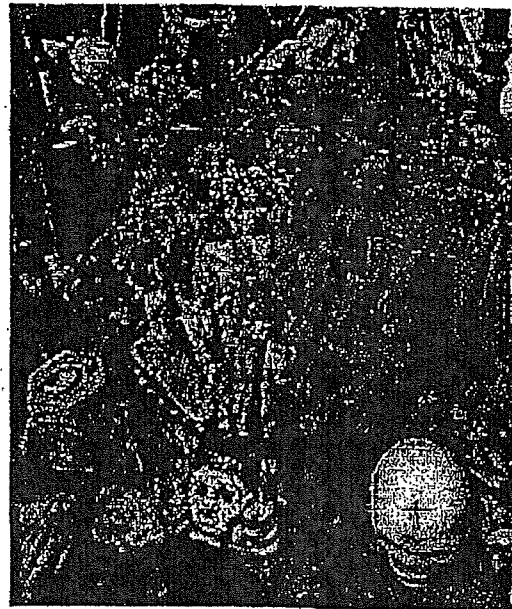
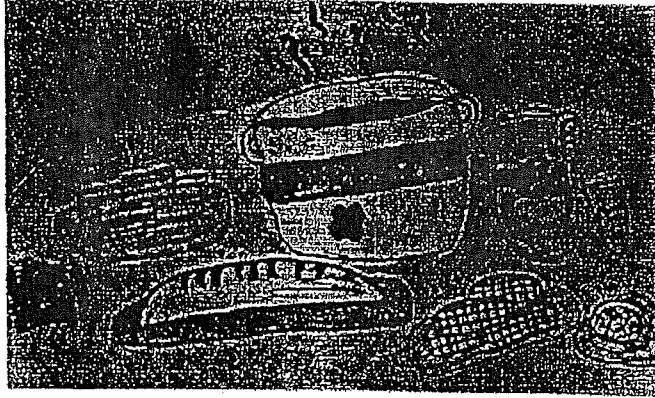
- Atole
- Chocolate
- Tamales

**Atole** is an ancient drink made from corn meal and water is flavored with various fruits.

**Chocolate** was first cultivated and consumed by the Mayans and Aztecs. The Aztecs believed that drinking chocolate, from the fermented cacao beans, would provide them with great wisdom, understanding and energy. The priestly classes drank it as a way of establishing a higher consciousness.

For the Aztecs, the cocoa tree had a religious significance. It was believed to be of divine origin that was a bridge between earth and heaven.

The **tamale** dates back to the Aztecs. Their main food was corn, which they made tortillas and tamales.



2000 Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) Altar at Mexico-Arte Museum. Some traditional foods found on altars are bread, fruit, vegetables and sweets.

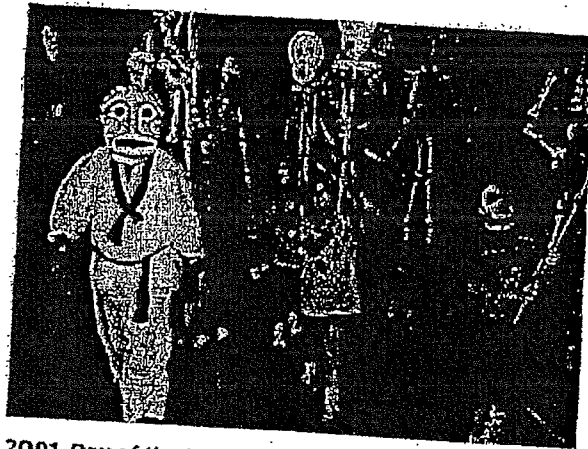
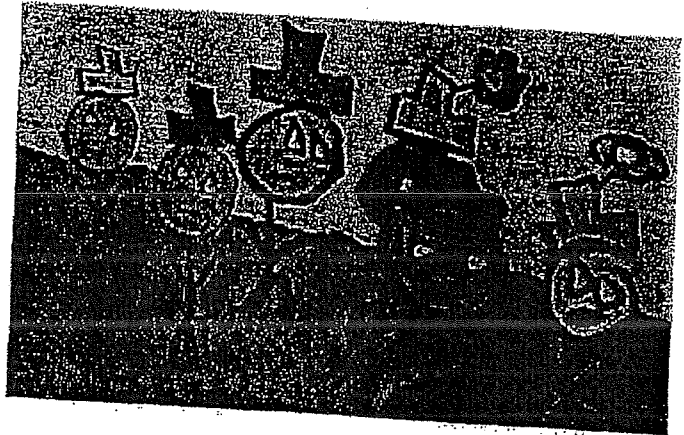
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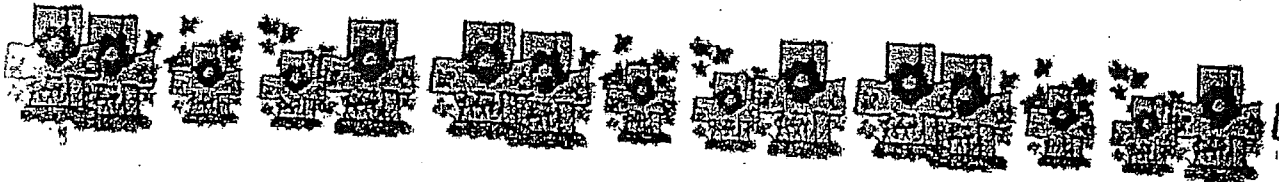
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A parade is a public march or procession honoring a particular occasion. A typical *Day of the Dead* (Día de los Muertos) procession ends at the cemetery. Offerings are brought to the graves and include the favorite foods, beverages and belongings of the dead.



2001 Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) Parade at Mexic-Arte Museum



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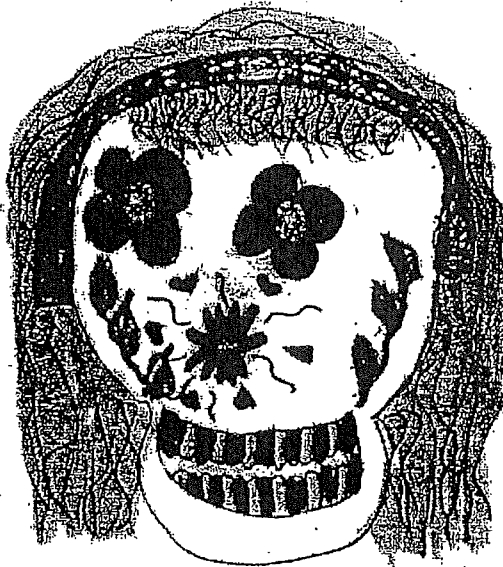
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The colors used on the altars have specific meanings.

- **Purple:** signifies pain, suffering, grief, and mourning.
- **Pink:** celebration
- **White:** purity and hope
- **Orange:** sun
- **Red:** the blood of life
- **Yellow:** *cempazuchitl* are marigolds that symbolize death. Petals are used to make a trail so that the spirits can see the path to their altars.



**Skulls** symbolize death and rebirth.

**Pan de muerto** represents the souls of the dead.

**Incense** represents the changing of the physical to the spiritual.

**Salt and water** represent ongoing life.



Pottery figurine head showing a face half fleshed and half as a skull; the duality of life and death. c. AD 800-1000. Soyaltepec, Oaxaca.

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